

What's Wrong With Letting Small Things Slide?

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I stopped one of my seamen last week and reminded him to shine his brass. It was a little tarnished. He said, "Yes, chief," and walked away with a bemused look. That look caused me to reflect a little. Did he understand, I wondered, why such a small thing was important?

My boot camp company commander thought it was extremely important. I remember doing more than a few pushups on account of my belt buckle. Uniform regulations insist on it, and my performance evaluation holds me accountable for it. Why? Does it matter, in the big picture, if there is a little tarnish on that buckle? Is there some significance beyond mere appearance?

Is there a reason such a simple task gets neglected? It doesn't take much effort - a little Nev'rDull, a rag and about two minutes of your time. You can even buy buckles today that won't tarnish! But you can walk on board any unit and find at least one individual with tarnished brass. It's human nature to want to neglect the small things - especially if no one else seems to care.

So why did I stop that seaman? If I had let him walk by, I'd be implying that it's OK to let some things slide. Don't sweat the small stuff. Concentrate on the things that are really important. I would have led that young Coastie to believe that he has some discretion as to what regulations he will or will not abide by.

Perhaps in the near future, when he is supervising his own seamen, he'd notice they are not wearing proper eye protection. They're wearing sunglasses, though, that's almost as good. Maybe one day he'd be doing daily boat checks. No need to look in that compartment, he reasons; it was checked yesterday. Perhaps he'd be the boat coxswain underway at night, for a familiarization run. No need to post a lookout. Visibility is great, and he can see forever. They're all small things.

Coasties are getting killed because of the small things. We are about to undergo a safety stand down because of the increase in boat mishaps. The admiral is scratching his head, trying to figure out where the problem is. This is not a policy problem. Nor does it reflect the desire or abilities of our crews. It is simply and irrevocably a leadership problem. We have senior enlisted members out there that wouldn't stop that seaman and insist that he shine his brass. I've seen chiefs walk alongside an officer and not chastise a junior member that just neglected a salute. I know E-6s that will complain about the poor work ethic of one of their subordinates but will not take corrective action. And I know officers that are aware of these shortcomings and do nothing. Even I am hesitant to correct a peer.

It appears that, as an organization, we have become afraid of confrontation. This needs to end. We have to begin holding our subordinates and ourselves accountable for the way in which we do business. We have to insist on professionalism - not just during standardization team or commanding officer's inspections; we must do it always, every day, every minute.

It's the small things that create mishaps. It's the habit of neglecting those small things that kills our shipmates. Our senior members are responsible to ensure that those habits do not develop. I am responsible to ensure that those habits do not develop. I stopped that seaman to save his life. Count on it.